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Diagramming *Irréversible*

Diarmuid Hester



Still from *Irréversible*

“Let me commence with the following notice: there is no Truth in diagrams, nothing sacred in geometry... but there may be a diagram of a truth in some.”

(John Mullarkey *Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline*, p. 157)

The explorations of individual films that have previously appeared in these pages have quite rightly sought to associate themselves with wider social issues, with

the craft of filmmaking and with the vocation of the filmmaker; thereby positioning the film within a wide range of socio-cultural issues. It's with a certain trepidation, then, that I dedicate the entirety of this piece to the study of a single director (Gaspar Noé) and a single film (2002's *Irréversible*): the risk is run, not merely of looking a little out of place, but also, of appearing oblivious to the constellation of contextual factors which renders this (and

any) film relevant. Nonetheless, in order to trace the internal logic of this complex and wilfully perplexing work, such singleness of purpose is, in this case, necessary, and by using the provisional construct of the diagram to chart the outline of the filmic process without reducing the film to a single interpretation, I hope that what follows initiates rather than forecloses discussion.

Irréversible, opening remarks

Noé's film is told as a series of fifteen vignettes, moving backward through narrative time, which progressively unearths the relatively simple story of lovers Marcus and Alex (played by real-life couple Vincent Cassel and Monica Bellucci), and their friend Pierre (Albert Dupontel). All three meet on the outskirts of Paris and make their way to a party in the centre of the city. Following an argument with Marcus, Alex leaves alone and on her way home she is raped and beaten into a coma. On discovering her bloodied, comatose body, Marcus and Pierre—with the help of some local gangsters—set off in search of her attacker, a pimp who goes by the name “Le Ténia” (the Tapeworm). Venturing progressively deeper into the heart of the city, they finally find themselves in a gay S/M club named the Rectum where a man is bludgeoned to death by Pierre. On its release, the film was the subject of a media frenzy that took umbrage at its two graphic, protracted scenes of brutal violence: the second scene (chronologically penultimate), in which Pierre savagely staves in someone's head with a fire extinguisher, and the rape scene which consists of a single, 9 minute shot. When premiered at Cannes in 2002, screenings were met with mass walk-outs, fainting and retching. Far more damagingly though, it was also met with critical condemnation: Jean-

Marc Lalanne of the *Cahiers du Cinéma*, for example, concluded a scathing review by stating that “from one end to the other, *Irréversible* is just a ridiculous film.”¹

However, (fulfilling Cassel's prediction in 2003 that “this movie will be studied at film schools years from now”)² in recent years Noé's film has garnered no small amount of critical attention. The most audacious of these have tended to narrativise Noé's development as a filmmaker by claiming that *Irréversible*, like his previous films *Carne* (“Flesh” 1990) and *Seul Contre Tous* (“Alone against all” 1998), aims at deconstructing the male subject and presenting a vision of “twisted masculinity”³. They claim that *Irréversible* intervenes into certain myths of masculinity and subtly subverts them: for instance, extended sadomasochistic scenes of bondage, whipping and CBT (cock and ball torture) in the gay club dissolve the unquestioned association—exemplified by Marcus' quest for revenge—between violence and the assertion of heterosexual masculinity. However, prompted no doubt by the film's release with films like *Memento* (2000), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004) and other successful films in which time is similarly accentuated, *Irréversible*'s reverse-chronology has also been considered as a force mobilised against the constraints of a conservative masculinity. The film not merely represents an intra-diegetic challenge to masculinity but additionally, the reverse-chronology prompts an extra-diegetic reaction on the part of the viewing male subject: disrupting the linear, cumulative and chronological sequence upon which subjectivity is built, it is argued, unsettles the normative structures of heterosexual masculinity.⁴ Similarly, Noé's use of low-frequency sound in the opening scenes of the film and his digital manipulation of filmic elements (or

shots) both now tend to be seen as part of the same manoeuvre aimed at producing disoriented and dissociative responses in the audience, thereby undermining the construction of a fragile masculinity.⁵ Here we will briefly attempt to round-out these investigations into sound, visuals, and temporality with an exploration of the spatiality of Noé's film. Mapping the loci Noé and his characters trace through *Irréversible* enables us to determine this essential – but as-yet unexplored – axis which contributes to making the film the thoroughly discomfiting cinematic experience that it is.

The 4th axis

From the moment the credits roll (backward –its red type dripping down, instead of scaling up), *Irréversible* announces its intention to arc its trajectory down. The stream of text soon begins to list and then to spiral, but continues its inexorable descent. As this sequence draws to a close, the spiralling infects the frame and, following a vertiginous drop from a prison's walls to the ground-level entrance of the Rectum, the camera descends yet deeper, boring deep into the underground pit of the S/M club. The sickening spiral continues (abetted by that low-frequency sound); 14 minutes in, we find the film's director mechanically masturbating, *seul*

contre tous... A new scene begins and the prospect of resurfacing is briefly proffered and quickly withdrawn: Marcus and Pierre descend the stairs of the Rectum and we are once more in the bowels of the place. An excited Marcus pleads with a reticent Pierre "Let's go down once; just once – let's go down" but thus far this has been one interminable descent. Subsequent scenes repeat this propensity for downward move-

ment: Pierre trudges slowly down the steps which lead the Rectum; Marcus sprints down the same steps having finally convinced Pierre to follow him; Alex emerges from an elevator at ground level, only to continue to descend to the subway, where she meets Le Ténia; on the way to the party, the trio take an elevator down to the subterranean Metro platform; in the penultimate scene, the camera swiftly cascades down from Alex and Marcus' apartment to the park below, mirroring the initial fall from the prison tower to the Rectum. Some scenes feature horizontal movement (Marcus drives a stolen taxi, Alex and Marcus get ready to go out), but these anticipatory scenes serve to prove rather than refute the predominant trajectory, accentuating the moment that plunges us once more downward. The sole instant of hopeful ascent as Alex climbs the short stairs to mezzanine level at the party, is inevitably cut short and she descends once more, in thrall to the irresistible drag.

The narrative progression of scenes also deposits protagonists at points geographically further and further removed from where they began: now in the club in

the depths of Paris-centre; now in an expansive, bourgeois apartment on the edge of the inner city; now boarding the Metro at Buttes-Chaumont, in the North-East of Paris; now coming to rest in Parc Buttes-Chaumont on the outskirts of the 19eme arrondissement. All then repeat the inevitable journey towards the centre of Paris, just as they appear to acquiesce, almost involuntarily, to the downward flux: movement

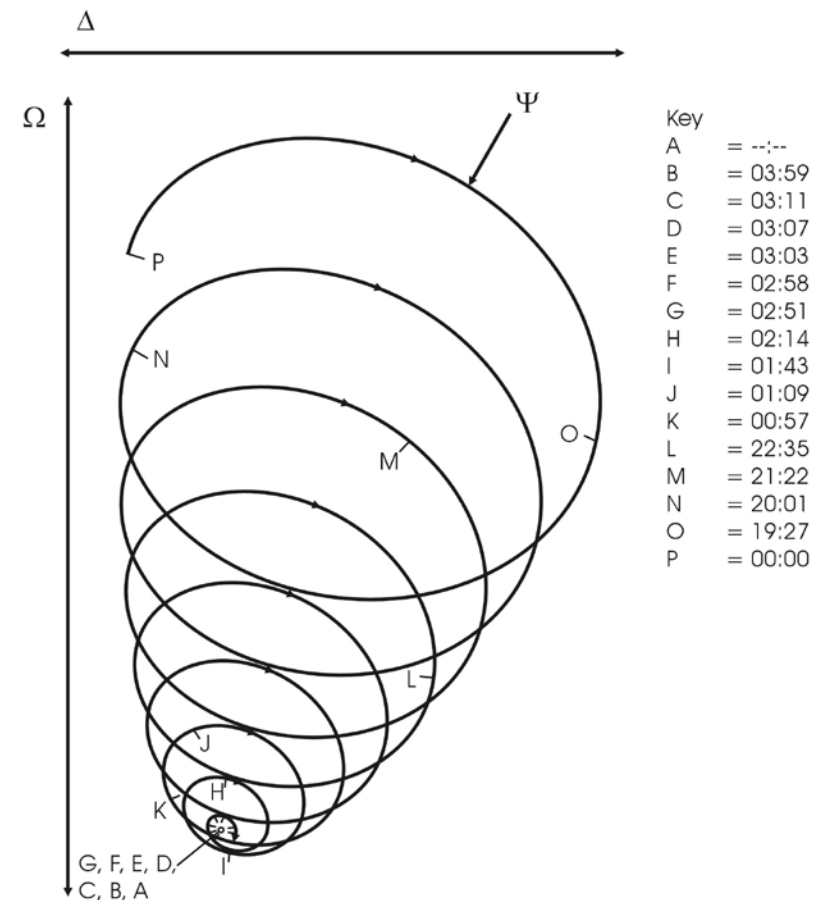


Figure 1, where axis Δ = distance from Paris-centre and axis Ω = depth. Descending trajectory of the film's loci is indicated by arrowheads. Line Ψ signifies duration, with each revolution of the curve representing 60 minutes of the period from 3:59 to 19:27, beginning with the credit sequence at --:-- and concluding with the closing scene at 00:00. The opening of each scene is indicated on the diagram and its corresponding time is noted in the key.

towards the interior is repeatedly yoked to a descending trajectory. When temporality is added to this combination (of breadth and depth) then charted diagrammatically, we are presented with the appearance of a 3 dimensional spiral or gyre (Figure 1). This diagram suggests that, not only are the Rectum and its environs the deepest and spatially most central points in the

film, but as such there is a continual and precipitous movement towards them. Diagramming breadth, depth and time in this way also enables us to propose one possible hypothesis of how the film's spatiality is connected to its chronology, which has been the concern of critical appraisals thus far. As we have pointed out, it has been put forward that *Irréversible* deconstructs the

“*Irréversible* aims at deconstructing the male subject and presenting a vision of twisted masculinity”

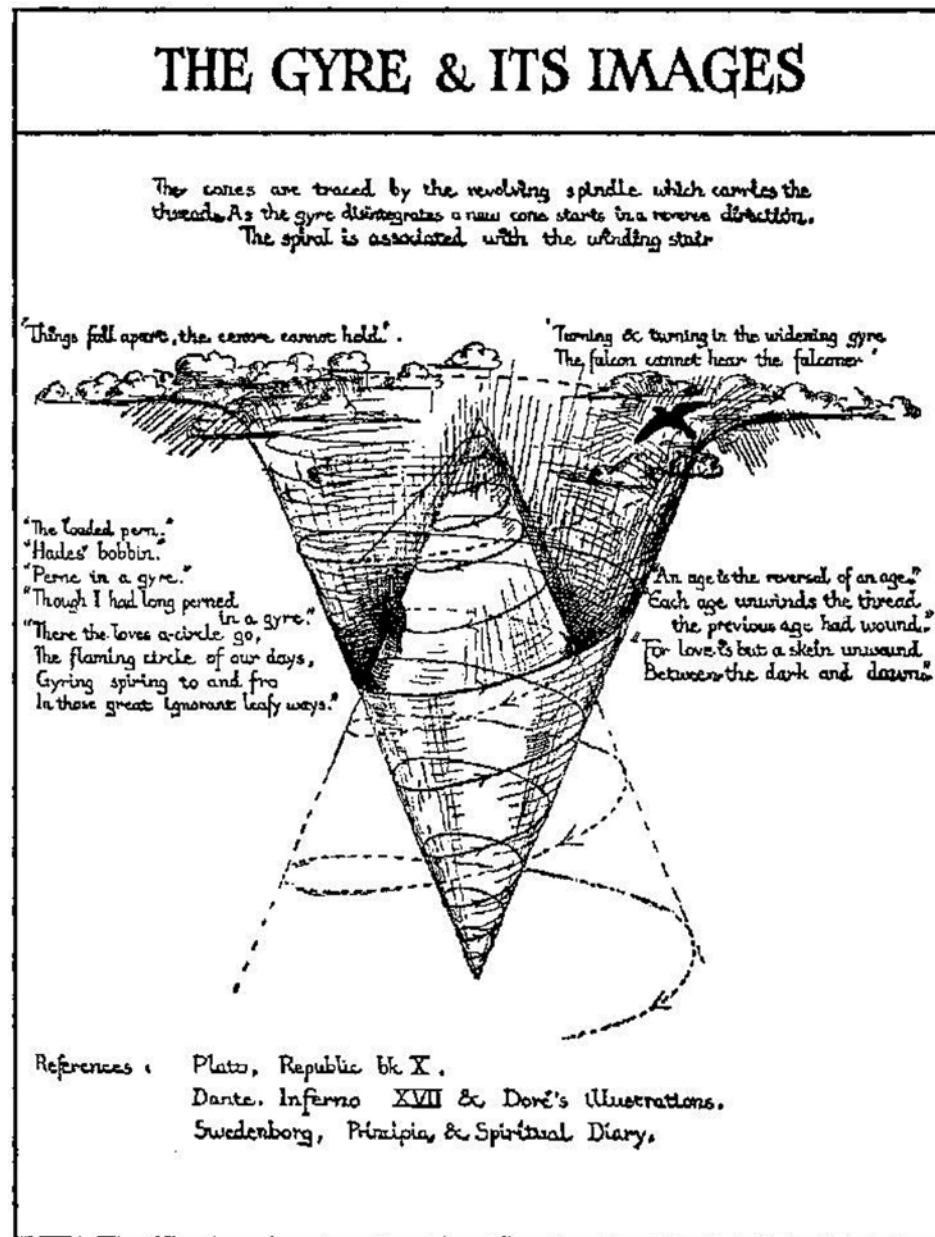


Figure 2. W. B. Yeats' "widening gyre"

self (in particular the heteronormative male self): because of its reverse chronology, it is claimed, the scene of (T/t)he (R/r)ectum comes to represent a recurring confrontation with the abject and induces the seemingly whole self to acknowledge that it is corrupted by the other. Our diagram may be seen to confirm formalistically what this theory seeks to prove psychoanalytically – it clearly shows that the Rectum persists as something like an inescapable primal scene, to which one is psychologically compelled to return again and again. The vector of this compulsion in each scene is the descent.

Some concluding remarks

Our diagram is reminiscent of W.B. Yeats' "widening gyre" which famously attempted to formalise the development of human consciousness by mapping time and space onto conic helixes (Figure 2).⁶ More ambitiously, he used the same geometrical form to formalise the development of humanity since the birth of Christ. However, where Yeats' diagram delineates temporal and spatial movement out and away from the centre (whence his "turning and turning in the widening gyre, the falcon cannot hear the falconer"), our diagram sees this archetype reversed, our vectors spiralling always down and in towards the centre. The clear antagonism of these two diagrams indicates the difference between a modernist and postmodernist approach and their comparison evinces (yet again, if more evidence were needed) the latter's problematic tendency towards the self-reflexive.

Yeats attempted to take the individual's psychological experience and, by connect-

ing it to something more universal, make (poetic and mystical) inferences about the course of history, a move which is obviously compatible with his system, and its orientation from the inside-out. Yet compared with this approach, Noé's film displays a solipsism and self-referentiality bordering on gratuitous onanism (no harm, then, in being treated to a shot of the director masturbating in the Rectum). According to the research we have noted, *Irréversible* is a thoroughly postmodern interrogation of straight male subjectivity, calibrating all aspects of the film to this goal – disorientating visuals and sound, fragmented narrative chronology and perplexing spatial distribution. And yet, having produced a thoroughly confusing and utterly alienating cinematic experience, the film estranges itself from any reference point other than itself such that it is incapable of effecting any fundamental change outside itself. Entirely consistent with this closed, self-referentiality, *Irréversible* is wholly dissociated from wider debates about the filmic representation of misogynistic violence, achieving its critique of masculinity only at the cost of graphic representations of the female form brutally disassembled.

1 May 2002 p. 51, my translation.

2 *The Guardian*, January 31st 2003, p. 4

3 Powrie, Phil. "The (W)hole and the Abject". *The Trouble with Men*. Ed. Phil Powrie, Ann Davies and Bruce Babington. London: Wallflower Press, 2004. p.208

4 See Eugénie Brinkema "Rape and the Rectum: Bersani, Deleuze, Noé." *Camera Obscura* 20 : 1 (2005) pp. 33-57

5 See Ricardo De Los Rios "Digital frames and visible grain: Spatial and material reintegration in 32 : 1 (2007) pp. 95 -109

6 See <http://www.yeatsvision.com/Geometry.html> for an interesting synopsis of the various geometrical foundations of Yeats' work.